PARK VISITORS VS BEACH TOURISTS A COMPARATIVE STUDY IN AN ITALIAN COASTAL REGION

Salvatore Bimonte ^{a *}

^a University of Siena, Department of Political Economy, Piazza S. Francesco 7, 53100 Siena, Italy, tel: + 39 0577 235053, fax: + 39 0577 232661, e-mail: bimonte@unisi.it

* Corresponding author

Abstract

This study investigates and discusses the controversial question of whether nature-based tourists (NBTs) are more sensitive to socio-cultural and environmental resources, have different attitudes toward local products and more positive economic effects on host communities and destinations than beach tourists (BTs). In order to test these aspects, a simultaneous comparative analysis of these two types of tourist based on an a priori and activity-based segmentation was carried out. Data was collected by questionnaire at two sites in the Maremma (a coastal area in southern Tuscany, Italy), each specific to the type of tourist investigated. In line with the findings of other studies, the results confirm that NBTs are older, more educated, more affluent, and more often employed in professional occupations than BTs. They also confirm the hypothesis that NBTs are more sensitive to environmental quality and have a more positive socio-economic impact. This study likewise highlights the strong role played by psychographic information in explaining tourist behavior. Three innovative findings concerning the relationship between income, education, personal commitment to the environment and tourist type are discussed at the end.

Keywords: *nature-based tourist, comparative study, environmental concern, economic impact, willingness to pay.*

Introduction

The many problems triggered by "mass" tourism have led to a call for "alternative" tourism (Brohman, 1996; Weaver, 1991; Butler, 1990; Dernoï, 1981), broadly defined as "forms of tourism that are consistent with natural, social and community values and which allow both hosts and guests to enjoy a positive and worthwhile interaction and shared experiences" (Smith and Eadington, 1995, p. 3)¹. One of the most debated and investigated forms of alternative tourism is nature-based tourism², which represents a significant and rapidly growing share of the tourist industry (Mehmetoglu, 2005; Nyaupane *et al.*, 2004; IES, 2000; Lindberg, 1998). The WTO estimates that it generates approximately 20% of all international travel expenditures (Newsome *et al.*, 2002)³. This figure, together with the different attitudes

and behavioral patterns that are assumed to characterize tourists who practice this type of tourism, justifies the attention that policy makers have recently been devoting to this segment of the tourist market.

Echoing the principles that define them, the nature-based tourists (NBTs) are supposed to have less negative socio-cultural and environmental impact on host communities, and to bring greater benefits to the economy of destinations (Epler Wood, 2002, Wallace and Pierce, 1996; Silverberg *et al.*, 1996; Smith and Eadington 1995; Butler 1990; Ceballos-Lascurain, 1988) than other types of tourist (Jafari, 1990; Wight, 1993; Wallace and Pierce 1996). According to the definition, nature-based tourists prefer small, family-run facilities, are more sensitive to natural and cultural resources, are more interested in local and “green” products and engender a greater multiplier effect (see Wurzinger and Johansson, 2006; Macleod, 2003; Blamey and Braithwaite, 1997; Wight, 1996b; Cazes, 1989).

In order to verify such issues, more empirical simultaneous comparative studies are required. Unfortunately, as noted by Xiao and Smith (2006), few studies on tourism have adopted a comparative approach and, according to Hvenegaard (2002), most use a data-driven approach (*a posteriori* segmentation)⁴ which gives rise to the problems highlighted by Weaver (2002). These aspects are even wider in studies on nature-based tourism.

Although there have been different types of segmentation studies on tourism (Bonn *et al.* 2005; McKercher, 2001; Kashyap and Bojanic, 2000; Baloglu and McCleary, 1999) and the association between types of alternative tourist and conservation motivations (Lou and Deng, 2008) and/or economic and social impacts (Aylward, and Lutz, 2003, Taylor *et al.*, 2003, Wallace and Pierce, 1996; Lindberg *et al.*, 1996) have been examined, to the author’s knowledge no simultaneous comparative analysis based on an *a priori* segmentation has been documented so far in the literature on NBT⁵.

In an attempt to narrow this gap, the present research compared two types of tourists holidaying simultaneously in the same area: nature-based tourists (NBTs) and beach tourists (BTs). The main goal was to verify whether NBTs are more sensitive to environmental quality, have different attitudes toward local produce and more positive economic impacts on host communities and destinations than BTs⁶. It also investigated whether and to what extent tourists behavioral patterns depend on the type of tourist one belongs to (psychographic information), rather than on socioeconomic characteristics (enabling conditions *à la Sen*), as some economic theoretical models show (for example those on the Environmental Kuznets Curve, see Bimonte 2002; Magnani 2000).

This being the purpose of the research, the first step was to define the two types of tourist and choose a way of segmenting them. An *a priori* and activity-based segmentation method was selected to carry out the analysis. This appeared to be the most appropriate method because the starting point of the research was not the entire

population of tourists or a specific segment to further split into data-driven groups according to a particular variable. The research aimed at exploring systematic differences between two particular subgroups of the population of tourists clearly defined by a specific vacation activity.

Defining tourist type: background

Alternative and mass tourism, including the type known as 3S (sea, sand and sun), have been considered mutually exclusive and depicted in dichotomous terms, with alternative tourism being considered the “good” and mass tourism the “bad” (Clarke, 1997; Mowforth & Munt, 1998; Jafari, 2000). This view has recently been challenged and a new perspective proposed, which considers alternative and mass tourism as extremes of a continuum, with no clear-cut boundary between the two in terms of “good” and “bad” values (Weaver, 2005; Weaver, 2001; Acott *et al.*, 1998). According to the two paradigms implied by these views, good is considered an inherent property of certain types of tourism or a characteristic that no existing form of tourism inherently possesses, but a goal to achieve.

The shift in attitudes to tourism and empirical evidence indicate that a clear-cut boundary between types of tourism is difficult to imagine, one reason being that many or even most tourists engaged in alternative activities are mass tourists (Weaver, 1999), and several forms of alternative tourism, such as nature-based tourism, overlap with other forms of tourism, including beach tourism (Weaver *et al.* 1998; Mehmetoglu, 2007). This makes it necessary to find a way of classifying tourists before beginning any kind of analysis.

Hvenegaard (2002) defines four main empirical ways of classifying tourists: researcher-based, respondent-based, motivation-based and activity-based. In the latter case the researcher defines the different varieties of tourist on the basis of places visited and activities engaged in.

According to the activity-based approach, tourists who travel to natural areas or destinations are considered NBTs (see Holden and Sparrowhawk, 2002, Lang and O’Leary, 1997). This does not mean that we should regard NBTs as a homogeneous group (Wight, 2001). Various methods have been proposed to differentiate them: for example, Laarman and Durst (1987) distinguished hard and soft NBTs, whereas Lindberg (1991) identified four types of NBT, i.e. hard-core, dedicated, mainstream and casual, the latter being those who partake of nature as part of a broader itinerary.

Method and sample description

Definition of nature-based and beach tourists

The present study compared two types of tourists: NBTs and BTs. It considered *NBTs to be tourists who visited the Natural Park of the Maremma during their vacation* (casual nature tourists), and *BTs to be seaside resort tourists who passed their*

holiday in the area without visiting the park. Due to the characteristics of beach tourism in the Maremma, the latter may be considered representative of the mass tourist⁷. These two types of tourist were chosen because both “consume” a natural resource, namely the park and the seaside, while sojourning simultaneously in the area. We could say that both are nature-oriented, but interact with the natural resource in quite different ways (Newsome *et al.*, 2002; Weaver, 2001).

Figure 1 *The Park*

Study site

Located on the coast of southern Tuscany, the Maremma is a well-known beach tourism destination. Under the pressure of real-estate development, especially along coast, in 1975 part of this region was set aside as a Regional Park in order to protect the outstanding examples of natural interest and beauty. It is the first park in Tuscany and one of the oldest in Italy. The Natural Park of the Maremma is centrally located and is an important destination for NBTs. In the last decade paying visitors have increased from about 49,000 to 80,000 a year. Park visitors are more than 20% of all tourist arrivals in Maremma. This figure rises to 40% in October, 50% in May and 60% in April. These characteristics and the simultaneous presence of NBTs and BTs made the Maremma a suitable area for analyzing the issue at stake.

Data collection and analysis

The survey took place in summer, during the peak tourist season for the park and neighboring coastal area. Data was collected by means of a questionnaire. Interviews were carried out in two locations, each specific to the type of tourist investigated. A total of 300 interviews were conducted by trilingual interviewers following a systematic sampling procedure⁸. One-hundred and fifty NBTs were selected and interviewed at the park gate, whereas 100 BTs were selected randomly in different types of accommodation. In order to consider day-trippers and owners of second homes, 50 interviews were also conducted with people in these categories on the beach.

For BTs, a set of accommodation facilities was drawn from the list of those available in the area, split into three main geographical sub-areas: Principina a Mare, Castiglione della Pescaia e Talamone/Fonteblanda. Accommodations were stratified into: *hotels and the like* (RTA, serviced apartments) and *campsite and tourist villages*. The first stratum was divided according to class: *1 or 2 stars* and *3 or 4 stars*. There are no 5 star hotels in the area. The sample composition is reported in Table 1.

Table 1 *Number of accommodation facilities selected and number of tourists interviewed per geographical area and type of accommodation (in brackets)*

<i>Type</i>	Geographical areas		
	Principina a Mare Marina di Grosseto	Castiglione della Pescaia Punta Ala	Talamone Fonteblanda
Hotel and RTA (1-2 stars)	1 (3)	1 (3)	1 (3)
Hotel and RTA (3-4 stars)	2 (9)	6 (25)	2 (7)
Campsites, Residences, Tourist Villages	3 (21)	5 (25)	2 (4)

Direct interviews combined with a pre-test produced a high return rate (about 95%), with no substantial differences between the two sub-samples. Both types of tourist were asked to answer the same questions. Since several types of NBT overlap with other types of tourist, BTs were asked a filter question to exclude individuals who had visited the park.

Due to the hypothesis put forward in the paper (i.e. that the proportion of individuals with certain characteristics is higher among the NBTs than among the BTs) and the characteristics of the sample, no assumption was made on the probability distribution of the variables, and a permutation technique, or the Fisher exact test, was used to analyze the data (non-parametric method). In fact, this independence test can be used regardless of the sample characteristics.

Results

Considering previous international research results (Epler Wood 2002; Wight 1996a; Boo 1990) and the lack of an unanimously shared operational framework (Priskin, 2003; Smith and Eadington, 1995), and considering the characteristics that are generally assumed to identify different types of tourist, the survey focused on selected descriptive (socio-demographic) characteristics together with intention (willingness) and outcome (actions) variables, looking for stylized facts supporting the hypothesis put forward in the definition of alternative tourist. Because of the nature of the study and the lack of unanimously accepted quantitative indices, tourists were compared *in terms of the intensity* of selected features rather than in terms of selected indicators⁹.

Statistical analysis confirmed that NBTs were older, more educated, more affluent, and more often employed/engaged in professional occupations. No specific findings emerged regarding length of stay or travel organizations. Trip was mainly self-organized. The main results are shown in Table 2. Table 3 reports the summary of independence test and their statistical significance.

The results also confirmed that park visitors were more sensitive to environmental issues. Tourists were asked to place some relevant social problems in order of importance. The majority (74%) of NBTs indicated pollution as their major concern, whereas this was true for less than 1/3 of BTs (29%), the latter being more worried about crime and unemployment. However, a high percentage of both types of tourist (100% and 84%) considered that environmental quality had a positive effect on individual welfare. Consistently, we expected that environmental quality influenced consumer choices and the prices consumers were willing to pay for certain type of goods.

Table 2 *Main socioeconomic and behavioural characteristics*

Characteristics	Park visitors	Beach tourists
Median age	43	39
Sex	52% male; 48% female	57% male; 43% female
Education (median class)	Degree	High school diploma
Income (median class)	EUR 42,000-54,000	EUR 6,000-18,000
Occupation	More professional	Less professional
Nationality	Italians 53% Foreigners 46%	Italians 76% Foreigners 24%
Home provinces of Italians	Tuscany or neighbouring regions 34%	Tuscany or neighbouring regions 78%
<i>Micro-facilities run by local family:</i>		
Accommodation	Farm-stay 30%	Farm-stay 2%
Food	Typical restaurants 93%	Typical restaurants 54%
Average daily expenditure (median class)*	EUR 42-55	EUR 18-30

Note: * Excluding the travel costs and overnight stay

Table 3 *Park visitors vs Beach tourists: summary of independence test*

Characteristics	df	χ^2	p-value*
Pollution, unemployment and crime	2	23.6510	<.0001
Preference to reside in unpolluted area rather than city	1	20.0970	<.0001
Environmental quality and perceived welfare	2	17.2106	<.0001
Interest in home purchase in park area	1	67.6933	<.0001
WTP higher price for home in park area	2	2.3016	.3299
Preference for local and organic products	1	44.5829	<.0001
Importance ascribed to availability of organic and local products in hotel	1	26.8122	<.0001
Effect of environmental quality mark on choice of hotel	1	13.8971	<.0001
WTP higher price for certified products	2	24.5806	<.0001

Note: * The independence test was carried out using the usual permutation techniques or the Fisher exact test.

Software: SAS

In order to verify this issue, tourists were asked whether they would be interested in purchasing a house in a natural park.¹⁰ Park visitors were more favorably disposed to the idea of house purchase than were BTs (85% vs. 31%), having the possibility to do so and knowing the restrictions connected with such ownership. Other things being equal, a high percentage of those interested in purchasing a house in a park were willing to pay a higher price for it (66% vs. 58%)¹¹. This confirms that environmental quality is a source of welfare for these tourists. In fact, according to the theory of consumer choice, people are expected to choose the alternative that generates the highest utility.

In order to investigate whether NBTs are more ecologically oriented than BTs, respondents were also asked about their attitude to local produce. NBTs showed greater interest in local products, such as those labeled PDO (Protected Designation of Origin), PGI (Protected Geographical Indication), TSG (Traditional Specialty Guaranteed) and organic, than BTs. The former declared that marks certifying local, environment-friendly or organic produce would influence their choice and stimulate their expenditure. They would be willing to pay higher prices for such products and services.

When respondents indicate their choices in hypothetical scenarios, it is important to test whether stated choices are in line with actual choices. In our survey factual evidence of actual spending patterns of respondents was consistent with the importance they declared to ascribe to quality marks. Park visitors devoted a higher percentage of their daily expenditure to the purchase of local and environment-friendly products that cost more than generic products. Although this was confined to tourists with higher daily expenditure (>55 EUR), the test highlighted that expenditure for typical products was related to tourist type (p -value < .002). This implies that park visitors generate a stronger demand for local products in absolute terms.

The demand for local products gives rise to more equitable economic growth, due to the widespread network of small and medium enterprises that produce them and to their greater multiplier effect. Since the economic multiplier is negatively related to propensity to import, demand for locally produced goods has a more positive economic impact on an area. By sustaining typical products, one also preserves landscape and cultural traditions.

Three main innovative findings are worth noting. The survey revealed a strong relationship (p -value < .0001) between the variables "income" and "visit to the park". Although conceptually and practically different, this result is *consistent* with a much debated hypothesis in environmental economics, the Income Elasticity Hypothesis. According (IEH) to this hypothesis, the demand for nature increases more than proportionally with income, making the environment, in the broadest sense, a *luxury good*.¹²

Similarly, a strong relationship ($p\text{-value} < .0001$) was found between level of education and visitors to the park: for a given income, park visitors had a higher level of education. Again, although conceptually different and aware of the improper use of the concept, education being *in se* a discrete variable, we are inclined to take this piece of evidence as a sort of Education Elasticity Hypothesis (EEH).

Finally, for BTs, the results confirmed that the sympathy for certain goals does not translate into acceptance of costs and sacrifices that actual application may entail (Butler 1998). This is not so for park visitors who were less willing to delegate and more favorably disposed to personal commitment. BTs were interested in environmental issues but balked at direct commitment. In more rigorous economic language, externalities were potentially-relevant but not Pareto-relevant for BTs (Buchanan and Stubblebine 1962).¹³

Conclusion

Despite the limits of the data collecting and sampling procedure of the present study, the research contributes in filling the gap that exists in the literature on the NBT and provides new data on this phenomenon. The findings of this study have significant theoretical and practical implications. The first relates to the socio-demographic profile and attitudes of NBTs. The research confirms the findings of others studies (Mehmetoglu, 2007; Wurzinger and Johansson, 2006; Priskin 2003; Epler Wood 2002; Hvenegaard and Dearden 1998; Meric and Hunt, 1998; Silverberg *et al.*, 1996), i.e. that NBTs are older, more educated, more affluent, and engaged in more professional occupations than other types of tourist, in our case frequenters of beach resorts. The results are also consistent with the principles that define the NBTs (Wurzinger and Johansson, 2006; Macleod, 2003; Jafari, 2000; Blamey and Braithwaite, 1997; Wight, 1996b; Cazes, 1989). In fact, the research demonstrates that they are more environmentally aware, more interested in local and “green” products, prefer small and family run rather than large-scale accommodation, and engender a greater multiplier effect. Considering the Plog’s work on the allocentric-psychocentric continuum (Plog, 1974), this also confirms the supposed allocentric tendencies of the NBTs (Weaver, 1999).

Statistical analysis showed that these aspects depend more on tourist type than socio-demographic and economic characteristics. This has an interesting theoretical implication, because it highlights the strong role played by *psychographic* information in understanding tourist behavior. This is an important aspect to consider when designing policies for the management and marketing of nature-based tourism destinations.

The study also highlights some innovative aspects. Data analysis showed a strong relationship between income, education and demand for nature. As stated, this is consistent with the IEH and EEH (see Bimonte, 2002 and Magnani, 2000). It also

proved that NBTs have a greater multiplier effect and this is true irrespective of daily expenditure. Previous studies have generally been restricted to analyzing willingness to pay and average daily expenditure of different categories of tourists. However, a given daily expenditure can have very different impacts on the local environment and socio-economic systems, as should already be quite clear. This and the interaction of tourism with other economic sectors is in need of further research.

As a concluding remark, it is worth stressing a final point. As indicated by Mehmetoglu (2007), not all tourists visiting nature-based resources can be considered NBTs from a motivational perspective. However, motivation cannot be the only criterion for defining NBTs. Although a distinction between forms of tourism is feasible, it is much more difficult to discriminate between types of tourist, since tourists normally engage in a variety of activities during a vacation. Weaver (2001) maintains that many if not most soft ecotourism participants are mass tourists engaged in such activities as part of a broader itinerary. This is exactly the case of this research. Nevertheless, the results demonstrate that tourists engaged in nature-oriented activities (park visitors) had completely different behavior and attitudes from those who did not (BTs), irrespective of type of holiday.

These findings should not be overlooked. They suggest that the resources upon which nature-based tourist flows are based can contribute positively to local development, if managed carefully. This and the incidence and even distribution of NBT flows should not be underestimated, because it is a useful support for tourist policies that aim at de-seasonalizing tourist activity, spurring expenditure and sustaining the local economy, rather than merely increasing tourist numbers.

To conclude, although the survey confirms that alternative tourism has the potential to promote positive local economic, social and environmental effects, it would be wrong to consider alternative tourism as a panacea (Butler 1990; Brockelman and Dearden 1990; Butler, 1990; Cohen, 1987) as it could be as damaging as mass tourism if not managed properly. Because of this, and considering the size of nature-based tourist flows, it would be a shrewd political bet for local planners to modify the attitude and behavior patterns of all types of tourists in order to make them conform to the principles defining alternative tourists. To this end, a modification of the characteristics of the supply side and instruments of a non-technical¹⁴ nature are required.

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Endnotes

¹ For a deeper analysis of this aspect see Cater (1993), Wearing and Neil (1999), Jafari (2000), and Newsome *et al.* (2002). According to the study carried out by Sirakaya *et al.* (1999), this is also the view shared by the eco-tour operators.

² Although conceptually different, the terms nature-based tourism and ecotourism have been used interchangeably in the tourism literature. However, it is generally accepted that ecotourism is a form of nature-based tourism. Ecotourism is normally considered to be a sustainable version of nature tourism (Epler Wood, 2002; Hall and Boyd, 2005). The definitional issue is beyond the scope of the present paper: readers are referred to the abundant literature on the topic (see Jafari, 2000; Newsome *et al.*, 2002; Mehmetoglu, 2000; Wight, 2001; Meric, and Hunt, 1998; IUCN, 1993; Whelan, 1991; Farrell and Runyan, 1991). A review of the existing literature on ecotourism definitions may be found in Sirakaya *et al.* (1999). They also

³ A rough estimate of the international ecotourism arrivals would be 7% (Lindberg, 1998, quoted in Epler Wood, 2002).

⁴ See Hvenegaard, and Dearden (1998) and Silverberg *et al.* (1996). A review of segmentation studies and approaches may be found in Dolnicar (2004).

⁵ Only Wurzinger and Johansson (2006) conducted a similar investigation but by a different method.

⁶ Therefore, recalling the classification introduced by Weaver (2005), the study used a “minimalist” rather than a “comprehensive” view to approach the problem.

⁷ Although simplistic, this is the usual association made (Weaver, 2001).

⁸ The systematic sampling procedure is a statistical method requiring the selection of every k^{th} element from a population, starting with one randomly selected observation.

⁹ The selection of the indicators and their respective weights is a very difficult task, also because these are normally site and time specific. On this aspect see what stated by Weaver (2005).

¹⁰ This is an increasing phenomenon in some regions (Buckley, 2003).

¹¹ This is consistent with the theory of Lancasterian demand (Lancaster, 1966). It is worth noting that we are in a context of stated preference.

¹² In the case of a luxury good, the curve of Engel, that is the curve that shows the relationship between the demand for a good and the income level, is not linear. All other things being equal, it follows that demand for the good increases more than proportionally with income and, as a consequence, the composition of the basket of purchased goods varies.

¹³ An externality is defined as potentially relevant when the activity, to the extent that it is performed, generates any desire on the part of the externally benefited (damaged) party (A) to modify the behaviour of the party empowered to take action (B). An externality which, to the extent that it is performed, exerts no such influence is defined as irrelevant (Buchanan and Stubblebine, 1962, p. 201-202). However, the simple desire to modify the behavior of another party does not necessarily imply the ability to translate this desire into practice. An externality is defined to be Pareto-relevant when the extent of the activity may be modified in such a way that the externally affected party (A) can be made better off without the acting party (B) being made worse off.

¹⁴ “A technical solution may be defined as one that requires a change only in the techniques of the natural sciences, demanding little or nothing in the way of change in human values or ideas of morality” (Hardin, 1968, p. 112). See also Bimonte (2008).

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